The Future of U.S. Strategy in the Balkans

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By law and presidential order, the U.S. Department of Defense must review operations in the Balkans this year. This could prove to be a critical process for the region. While the United States is unlikely to depart the Balkans unilaterally or precipitously, the present administration has reservations about using the U.S. military for protracted peace operations in areas of limited national interest. These reservations resonate among many sectors of the U.S. elite and the general public.

To analyze the future of U.S. strategy in the Balkans and the U.S. Army's contribution, the Strategic Studies Institute and the Columbia University's Institute of War and Peace and Institute of East Central Europe co-sponsored a major conference in February 2001. Held at Columbia University, this brought together a distinguished group of speakers and participants from the United States and Europe. Panelists were encouraged to offer frank assessments of what the United States and its allies have accomplished in the Balkans, particularly Kosovo and Bosnia. The conference could not have been more timely since armed gangs were inciting violence in Serbia's Presevo valley and along the Macedonian border with Kosovo as the meeting took place.

One of the fundamental issues discussed by the conference participants was what the allied governments, including Washington, should seek in the way of a political order for the former Yugoslavia. The official policy of the United States, NATO, Russia, and the European Union is not to support the formation of new states. Some conference participants observed that hard borders inhibit the trade and economic growth necessary for real progress toward peace and stability in the region.

Likewise, the United States does not support revising the political-military provisions of the Dayton Accord even though Bosnia is not progressing at the rate hoped for by the treaty's authors. Nonetheless, some conference participants saw the need for a new international conference that goes beyond the Dayton Accord. Others cautioned that such a process would be very painful, slow, and further delay effective steps toward peace and stability.

In view of Bosnia's economic and political stagnation, the continuing violence in Kosovo, and Montenegro's continued quest for independence, many of the conference participants were critical of official U.S. policy. They voiced a wide range of opinions concerning the future of allied policy. Some speakers considered the current benchmarks for success to be unrealistic and in need of objective revision. Others feared that the United States and its partners would be caught between the obligations to protect Kosovo Albanians and Albanian nationalism and the rising violence. European speakers warned of American unilateralism despite Secretary of State Colin Powell's clear message on the intent of the administration to work with its European partners. One speaker argued that NATO should make the Balkans a formal area of responsibility and begin the long-term investment necessary to integrate the region into the rest of Europe. Another argued that NATO must become part of a wider European "security regime."

In general, the conference participants agreed that the most critical tasks for the establishment of a "self-sustaining peace" are economic and political. They disagreed, though, on what that meant in practice and who should take the lead. Some speakers felt that the European Union and existing regional and sub-regional organizations should be preeminent. There was some

agreement, however, that if the United States withdrew from the Balkans, so would NATO, and that the European Union presently is incapable of taking over.

Whoever leads must find ways to strengthen the Balkan states. While there was a general agreement among the panelists on the need for restoring the region's infrastructure, they disagreed on the preferred outcome of the political issues. These differences among the panelists and with members of the audience highlight the complexity of the problems facing the Balkans. Given the official position of the governments involved and the critiques that these drew, it was difficult to reach agreement on what needs to be done. But it is precisely this disagreement that highlights the need for a strategic approach encompassing mutually reinforcing military-political-economic measures.

Several panelists argued that thinking about the Balkans is mired in traditional stereotypes and the myth that order can be imposed from outside the region. This argument contradicts demands for even more substantive NATO and European Union involvement. Alternatively several panelists contested the emphasis on political resolutions of borders and states with an emphasis on reconstructing societies and states from the bottom up on the basis of what is called "soft" security initiatives such as infrastructure building, economic reconstruction at the local and regional level, and repair to the damaged "social ecology" of the region. At the same time, some conference participants did not consider recent trends in Croatia and Serbia as positive as might be imagined from reading the newspapers even thought no one argued that the Tudjman or Milosevic regimes were preferable to current ones. Nevertheless, it is clear that the community of experts on the Balkans is deeply divided.

For some conference participants, the priority is securing the current peace and democratizing civil-military relations in the former Yugoslavia over a long but unspecified period of time. This would allow the integration of the Balkans into the European military community through Partnership for Peace. The long-term goal is a security community where the idea of one state attacking another is inconceivable, and governments share common norms about the role of the military.

Other issues arose throughout the discussions. One centered on Russia. U.N. Resolution 1244 which provides the mandate for intervention in Kosovo specifically prohibits the termination of the "occupation" or a fundamental change in the status of Kosovo without the consent of the Permanent Members of the Security Council. This gives Russia a veto power over major changes to the mission. Because Russia opposes any diminution of Yugoslav sovereignty, NATO, including the United States, cannot unilaterally change the status of Kosovo. This complicates any discussion about the long-term status of Kosovo. The same probably holds for Bosnia as well. If the Dayton Accord were reopened, Russia would demand a say in that outcome. Any fundamental changes in the status of Bosnia might trigger corresponding demands in Kosovo and Montenegro. Balkan stability, in other words, is both complex and fragile.

The United States must act in partnership with its allies and Russia in the Balkans. As Powell recently announced, the United States and its allies "went in together and will go out together." While this sets to rest European fears of a unilateral or precipitous withdrawal of American forces, it obviously does not furnish sufficient guidance to resolve the troubling issues in the region.

Concerns about allied unity dominate discussions of the Balkans. In Bosnia, for instance, there is unity of effort but not of command in the military sector. But in Kosovo, the final arbiter of what a force does is its own national command authority, not the Commander of the Kosovo Force. Although the necessity of coordinating the activity of the military forces in both Kosovo and Bosnia is an obvious and a demanding task, it is even more difficult to coordinate the activity of

the various international security organizations and nongovernmental relief and democratization organizations active in these areas.

Again, there was no unified vision of how this coordination should be done. But all these disagreements and, in some cases, the passionate intensity with which opposing political preferences are held among the governmental departments of the United States and its allies illustrate two urgent necessities for the U.S. Government and its armed forces. First, the U.S. Government, as part of its ongoing strategic review, needs to come to a uniform understanding throughout its agencies as to what its real objectives and interests are in the Balkans. These should be made clear to provide appropriate guidance to governmental agencies. Second, all options should be coordinated with the other major powers active in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo, resourced, and implemented fully under the clear expectation of a long-term presence until objectives are either met or prove to be unattainable.

As much as anything, success in the Balkans requires a strategic perspective that integrates all the instruments of power towards a shared objective. The conference was not intended to provide that guidance but rather to raise the profile of the debate. It provided much of the information that will be needed for the development of a strategic perspective and a focus on the specific issues that must be addressed, such as the future status of the occupied areas, the direction of economic-political-military efforts at democratization and regional integration with a view towards overall integration of the Balkans over time with Europe. In the coming months, the Strategic Studies Institute will publish selected papers from the conference to develop in greater detail the ideas introduced in this brief.

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